

# Literature and Psychology

The News Letter of the Conference on Literature and Psychology of the Modern Language Association

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....Les rêves de l'homme sont de deux classes. Les uns, pleins de sa vie ordinaire, de ses préoccupations, de ses désirs, de ses vices, se combinent d'une façon plus ou moins bizarre avec les objets entrevus dans la journée, qui se sont indiscretement fixés sur la vaste toile de sa mémoire. Voilà le rêve naturel; il est l'homme lui-même. Mais l'autre espèce de rêve le rêve absurde, imprévu...ce rêve que j'appellerai hiéroglyphique, représente évidemment le côté surnaturel de la vie, et c'est justement parce qu'il est absurde que les anciens l'ont cru divin....[E]t encore aujourd'hui, sans parler des onéiromanciens, il existe encore une école philosophique qui voit dans les rêves de ce genre tantôt un reproche, tantôt un conseil; en somme, un tableau symbolique et moral, engendré dans l'esprit même de l'homme qui sommeille. C'est un dictionnaire qu'il faut étudier, une langue dont les sages peuvent obtenir la clef.

--Baudelaire. Le Poème du Haschisch,  
Part III "Le Theatre de Seraphin"

Whenever your Editor finds that an epigraph has run over three or four lines, he feels somewhat concerned. Do these "headnotes" serve any useful purpose? Do these occasional back-references to authors who have had something to say about psychodynamics, for the most part years before the scientific psychologist had come to exist,--do they point up our basic contention that the dynamics of the mind were and are always in the domain of literature? Does the fact that Baudelaire over a hundred years ago had keen insight into the nature of the dream help us to interpret Baudelaire better? Opinions from our readers are earnestly desired, and, if the opinions are favorable, suggested excerpts and quotations from all fields of literature would be most welcome.

On page 2 of the December, 1952, issue we announced our intention of publishing an abstract of a paper originally delivered at the English Institute by Professor Carvel Collins, on Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury. The manuscript did not arrive in time for inclusion in that issue, and Professor Collins has now been obliged to withdraw it. It will be published elsewhere, however, and we shall call attention to it again, since we feel that it is sure to stimulate much discussion.

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The leading article in the present issue is by Professor Erwin Steinberg of Carnegie Tech., not to be confused with Abraham Steinberg, whose article on Tender is the Night led our last issue. Professor Steinberg, in commenting on Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, raises a question on which there has never been any real agreement or, for that matter, much direct evidence. How specific should a writer or a critic be in making use of psychodynamic symbols? When Professor Burns analyzed a critical passage from Jane Eyre, he limited himself to direct quotation with appropriate emphasis on certain words and passages, but with no attempt to relate these passages to specific symbol-patterns as proposed by Freud. To most of our readers they seemed clear enough. Mr. Burns pointed out that their significance was not lost on some of the completely "uninformed" readers in Bronte's time. Yet Mr. Steinberg's seniors are so benighted as to need explanation of a knife symbol!

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#### FREUDIAN SYMBOLISM AND COMMUNICATION

Effective symbols in a piece of literature should be neither arbitrary nor superimposed. Yet in the first flush of their discovery of depth psychology, many novelists leap to use its symbols, forgetting that, however, these symbols may communicate below the conscious level, on the conscious level they still mean little to most of the vast audience of readers. The result often is a novel that is unsatisfying and even confusing precisely because the symbols that are supposed to carry the most meaning fail to communicate at all. This difficulty always arises when an artist fails to make a new system or a new philosophy serve this art and instead uses the new ideas without thought to whether they communicate. A good example of this failure to subordinate system to aesthetic can be found in Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf. And in a later work the same author provides an excellent example of success, synthesizing that same system and earlier techniques of writing so that the new symbols are made to serve her art rather than her art serving as a vehicle for the new symbols.

The "new system" was, of course, Freudian psychology, and that Mrs. Woolf was thoroughly familiar with it there can be no doubt. Kunitz and Haycraft report:

As for Sigmund Freud, she was partly responsible for the publication in English of some of his works and for the vogue of psychoanalysis in England especially in 1918-22.<sup>1</sup>

DeLattre says:

Virginia Woolf n'a certainement ignoré ni la théorie générale de la psychanalyse élaborée par Sigmund Freud et ses disciples Jung et Adler, ni le procédé nouveau "qui a pour but de plonger dans l'inconscient, et d'en ramener des morceaux dans le jour de la conscience."... Cette connaissance de la psychanalyse, dont la vogue fut considérable en Angleterre de 1918 à 1922, ... a pu stimuler

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1. S. J. Kunitz and H. Haycraft, Twentieth Century Authors. (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1942), p. 1549.



la curiosité de la romancière anglaise....<sup>2</sup>

In Mrs. Dalloway, published in 1925 (only three years after the vogue which DeLattre and Kunitz and Haycraft mention), Mrs. Woolf makes rather obvious use of phallic symbols. But they are not used very skillfully, for if the reader is not acquainted with Freudian psychology he misses an important point in the development of one of the major characters, Peter Walsh. A few references to the plot and text of the novel demonstrate this point very simply. In Mrs. Dalloway, Peter Walsh, returning from a long stay in India, goes to see an old love, Clarissa, who, years before, had rejected him for a rival, Richard Dalloway. According to the story that Peter tells Clarissa, he has returned to England to arrange for his marriage with a woman he met in India. As the reader follows along, however, he begins to wonder whether Peter does not still love Clarissa, and he looks for clues that will help him define the relationship. One of the important clues, however, may not be available to him if he is not conversant with Freudian symbolism. Consider the following quotations from Mrs. Dalloway:

Putting his hand into his pocket, he [Peter] took out a large pocket-knife and half opened the blade.

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"How heavenly it is to see you again!" she [Clarissa] exclaimed. He had his knife out. That's so like him, she thought. (p. 60)

...and he took out his knife quite openly--his old horn-handled knife which Clarissa could swear he had these thirty years--and clenched his fist upon it.

What an extraordinary habit that was, Clarissa thought; always playing with a knife. (p. 65)

For Heaven's sake, leave your knife alone! She cried to herself in irrepressible irritation....

I know all that, Peter thought; I know what I'm up against, he thought, running his finger along the blade of his knife...and...suddenly he burst into tears.... (p. 69)

[Peter sees an attractive young woman on the street and follows her.]

Straightening himself and stealthily fingering his pocket-knife he started after her to follow this woman, this excitement.... (p. 79)

[Peter pauses across the street from Clarissa's house before entering.] The body must contract now, entering the house, the lighted house, where the door stood open, where the motor cars were standing, and bright women descending:

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2. Floris DeLattre, Le Roman Psychologique De Virginia Woolf. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1932), pp. 128-129.

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the soul must brave itself to endure. He opened the big blade of his pocket-knife. (p. 250)<sup>3</sup>

Anyone familiar with Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams will, of course, recognize the symbolism.<sup>4</sup> Peter's suppressed aggression and his desire for Clarissa (and for the pretty young woman!) are perfectly obvious here, obvious, that is, to those who know something about phallic symbols. But to those who do not, the question of how Peter feels toward Clarissa remains a puzzling one. It could be argued that even if a reader does not understand the symbols, they nevertheless communicate.<sup>5</sup> But to respond to a symbol is not the same as understanding it consciously, and the symbolism here must be clearly understood if Peter is to be understood. The repeated failure of students in a course in the modern novel (given by this writer) to understand Peter's feelings for Clarissa until they have been introduced to passages in The Interpretation of Dreams attests to this point. Before their introduction to phallic symbolism, the students are puzzled about Peter and even annoyed; after they have learned the meaning of the symbols, Peter's fuzzy outline falls into much sharper focus for them. This is an important point, for on it rests the main argument of this paper: that the symbolism in the passages quoted from Mrs. Dalloway does not communicate and thus Peter and his relationship to Clarissa are not clear. College seniors, even when they are not literature majors, are relatively sophisticated readers; and when, unsolicited, they express not only inability to understand the Peter-Clarissa relationship, but annoyance at the author's not explaining that relationship, it may be said that the author is not communicating to any but a very limited group.

It is perfectly understandable, of course, that Virginia Woolf, like many other writers, should have tried to use Freudian concepts in her novels. But not until she was able to fuse the new symbols with more traditional imagery (a process which revitalized and supported the old imagery and helped make clear the new) did she use them successfully. Thus, in a later book Virginia Woolf works phallic symbols in with more traditional symbolism, and the fusion of the two types of symbols, reinforcing one another, communicates very well, whether the reader understands Freudian symbolism or not. Here are three passages from To the Lighthouse, published only two years after Mrs. Dalloway. In this scene, Mr. Ramsay, feeling very sorry for himself comes into the room to find his wife and their son James bent over a book:

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3. Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925).

4. "...all sharp and elongated weapons, knives, daggers, and pikes represent the male member...A room [or house?] in a dream represents a woman... The interest as to whether the room is "open" or "locked" will be readily understood in this connection.' From Sigmund Freud, The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud. (Trans. and ed. by Dr. A. A. Brill), (New York: The Modern Library, 1938), pp. 371-372.

5. As, indeed, Clarissa 'understands' the knife: "For Heaven's sake, leave your knife alone! she cried to herself in irrepressible irritation..."



There he [Mr. Ramsay] stood, demanding sympathy.

Mrs. Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, holding her son [James] in her arm, braced herself and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. He wanted sympathy... (p. 58)

Standing between her knees, very stiff, James felt all her strength flaring up to be drunk and quenched by the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again, demanding sympathy. (p. 59)

...and James, as he stood stiff between her knees, felt her rise in a rosy-flowered fruit tree laid with leaves and dancing boughs into which the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of his father, the egotistical man, plunged and smote, demanding sympathy. (p. 60)<sup>6</sup>

In this section describing Mr. Ramsay drawing new life from his wife, Mrs. Woolf again uses Freudian symbols: a column of spray, a fountain; a beak of brass, a scimitar.<sup>7</sup> But here the symbols are fused with descriptive words and phrases and with other images: "a rain of energy," "spray of life," "delicious fecundity," "a rosy-flowered fruit tree"; "fatal sterility," "barren and bare," "arid"; "he wanted...his barrenness made fertile" (p. 59), "her strength flaring up to be drunk and quenched." The imagery of rain, flowering, and fecundity and of aridity and sterility communicate whether the more specific (but more esoteric) symbols of human birth and the human male do or not. Thus in these passages, even if the reader does not understand the Freudian symbolism, he cannot fail to understand the meaning of the passage; and whatever meaning the reader gathers unconsciously from the Freudian symbols (a point not of concern here) will support that understanding. This communication below the level of consciousness, however, will not by itself be enough, as has been pointed out above, to satisfy the reader's desire to understand--consciously--what is happening.

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6. Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927).

7. According to The Interpretation of Dreams, water symbolizes, among other things, amniotic fluid; and rain is a symbol of fertility (p. 396). "Coming out of the water" means "being born" (p. 394). From The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud. See also footnote 4.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY (IX)

It is interesting to note that one of the pioneers in psycho-literary criticism is still active. In previous issues (I-2-3, I-4-6, and II-3-7) we have referred to works by the Swiss psychologist-poet Charles Baudouin. His most recent contribution is:

Le Triomphe du Héros (Etude psychanalytique sur le mythe du Héros et les grands épopées), published in 1952.

In the Saturday Review for January 31, 1953, Dr. Franz Alexander comments upon "the most mature and sophisticated book" by one of the most prolific of psycho-analytic authors:

Theodor Reik - The Secret Self. New York, 1953.

"It is written," continues Dr. Alexander, "on a topic which is closest to Reik's heart: psychoanalytic sidelights upon great authors and their works." The reviewer stresses the critical as well as the psychoanalytic validity of the study. What he says is of particular interest to us:

For Reik, the essence of psychoanalysis is an 'inner experience.' He deeply resents the current trend towards mechanization, standardization, and therapeutic expediency which favors the advent of the 'therapeutic technician' and threatens the detached explorer of the unconscious mind with extinction. Reik is one of the last of the Ionians. More than any other psychoanalytic writer, he draws his knowledge of the unconscious mind equally, or perhaps even more, from the study of great dramatists and storytellers than from the study of his patients. [S.R., Vol. XXVI, No. 5, p. 15]

Among the writers upon whom Reik comments, either as sources or as digressions, are Goethe, Shakespeare, Heine, and Anatole France.

In previous issues we have referred to papers published in The American Imago. At this time, and in the light of the general consensus as to the concept of psycho-literary criticism which our group represents, it would seem valuable to consider a full year's issues of this quarterly. Founded about ten years ago, while Freud was still living, it had as its first editor the Viennese psychoanalyst transplanted to Boston, Dr. Harns Sachs, who has always shown great interest in the application of psychoanalytic principles to the arts. During the past few years The American Imago has been under the editorship of Dr. George B. Wilbur of South Dennis, Massachusetts, who refers to himself as the Publisher and Managing Editor.

Volume 9, which consists of issues published from the spring of 1952 to the fall and winter of 1952-53, consists of four numbers (published in three issues) totalling over 425 pages, plus a sketchy and rather inadequate index. Twenty-one authors are represented in 19 articles. (In considering these, the present writer will exclude his own contribution, except to note that in the index, it is the only paper which is identified--as in its sub-title--as "a study in psychoanalytic criticism.") The subjects covered are, of course, not



all literary. The quarterly, which followed a pattern laid down by Britain's Imago and its Viennese predecessor, is designated as "A Psychoanalytic Journal for the Arts and Sciences."

Considering, therefore, only those papers which are directly concerned with literary criticism, or at least with the consideration of literary material from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, we find six papers; to wit,

"Uncanniness, Yearning, and Franz Kafka's Works" by M. Bernard Hecht, M. D., assistant resident in psychiatry at the Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City (April)

"Psychopathology of Shakespeare's 'King Lear'" by Arpad Pauncz, M. D., of the Veterans Administration Hospital at Downey, Illinois (April)

"Othello's Obsessions" by Abraham Bronson Feldman, Ph. D., who is identified as connected with the University of Pennsylvania and is referred to in a letter from Theodor Reik (Footnote, pp. 163, 4) as a psychologist (June)

"Bottom's Dream" by Weston A. Gui, M. D., who is identified only by an address in Evanston, Illinois (Fall-Winter)

"Unconscious Envy in Brutus" by Harold Feldman, identified by an address in Philadelphia (Fall-Winter)

"Georg Buechner or The Suffering Through the Father" by John S. White, who is associated with the City Center of Music and Drama in New York City [Fall-Winter].

There are related articles that deal with art, archaeology, music, philosophy, and anthropology.

It is interesting to note that four of the papers deal with Shakespearean plays, or at least with characters in the plays, two with a pair of the most difficult and controversial writers in nineteenth and twentieth century German prose fiction. Four of the authors represented are not professionally concerned with literary disciplines; Mr. White is professionally active in the theatre, and there is no evidence as to Mr. Feldman's profession. His paper evidences considerable acquaintance with literature and history, although the two are sometimes confused in his analyses.

The Shakespearean analyses are generally labored, often tenuous, frequently irritating. They represent the type of "criticism" against which Professor Griffin protested ("The Use and Abuse of Psychoanalysis in the Study of Literature," Vol. I, No. 5-6, pp. 3 et seq.) and which Professor Harbage has referred to as "irresponsible." Probably the best of the papers, from the viewpoint of sound literary criticism, is Mr. White's account of Georg Buechner. If these papers are representative of literary criticism as it is often found in The American Imago--and the present writer is of the opinion that they are--it might be well if the editor would consider certain fundamental principles which are set forth by Professor Henry Peyre in his recent study of Baudelaire.

Les médecins ont écrit et écriront encore sur la maladie de Baudelaire: ce sont souvent des jeunes gens en mal de thèse médicale qui, avant de se lancer à l'assaut des maux réels qu'ils faudra bien parfois guérir, commettent un rapide écrit sur quelque grand malade du passé, incurable mais idéal patient, puisqu'il ne peut qu'accepter dans sa tombe les diagnostics qu'on prononcera sur lui....Les hommes de cette profession respectée sont souvent meilleurs romanciers que critiques; et leur critique confine volontiers au roman ....La faiblesse de ces études n'est pas dans leur principe même, car nous croyons très possible l'application de la psychanalyse à la littérature. Elle tient plutôt à la fragilité de trop de leurs hypothèses, à la brutalité de trop de leurs affirmations, à la gaucherie qu'étaient ces hommes de science lorsqu'ils tâchent d'analyser les textes littéraires pour en tirer des enseignements de portée psychologique. Il semble qu'ils perdent alors la première des vertus scientifiques, la soumission aux faits, et n'acquièrent pas aisément l'esprit critique nuancé que possèdent parfois les hommes de formation littéraire. [Connaissance de Baudelaire, Paris, 1951, pp. 39, 40]

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